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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
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RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0275
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0320
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C O N F I D E N T I A L NOUAKCHOTT 000664

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM PINR FAID KPAO MR
SUBJECT: FAL ADDRESSES SLAVERY ISSUE

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 605

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

(U) Key Points

-- During a speech in the northern city of Akjoujt May 27, Col Fal said that he was "the first member of all anti-slavery movements" in Mauritania and he encouraged all Mauritians to join him in "ending these types of ideas and behaviors."

-- The Taya government had previously stated that slavery, which was officially outlawed in 1981, no longer existed in Mauritania.

(C) Comments

-- While Fal's comment was not an outright acknowledgement of the existence of slavery (as reported by several international media outlets, including Fox News), his speech marks a significant step forward in publicly addressing the highly-sensitive issue.

-- Fal continues to break new ground in addressing some of Mauritania's most sensitive issues, including refugees and past human rights abuses (reftel). These positive steps are encouraging national dialogue on these former taboos.

End Key Points and Comments.

11. (U) Fal spoke to a crowd of several thousand in the northern city of Akjoujt May 27 as part of a national presidential tour that began April 28. Fal's speech focused on getting-out-the-vote for the National Constitutional Referendum scheduled for June 25. At the end of his speech, Fal commented on a banner which read "yes for the abolition of slavery."

12. (U) After reading the text of the banner aloud, Fal said "Yes, and I repeat, yes for the abolition of slavery in all its forms." "Moreover, I say that I am the first member of all anti-slavery movements and I call on all three million Mauritanian people to join me," he said, adding that all forms of slavery should be confronted, including "slavery of

the mind...and slavery in behavior."

¶3. (C) Boubacar Messaoud, president of the leading Mauritania anti-slavery NGO, SOS Esclaves, told Poloff that "Fal's statement is an important step in addressing this problem...that continues despite the legal abolition of slavery 25 years ago." He added that Fal now needed to "take steps to address the problem," saying that "words need to be followed by actions."

¶4. (C) Messaoud said that he had seen "progress" on the slavery issue under the Fal government, but said "so much remains to be done." He said he was hopeful that Fal's words would promote further dialogue, but ultimately he believed "it will be a long time before this issue is resolved."

¶5. (U) In June 1994, Amnesty International claimed that approximately 90,000 Mauritanians lived as "the property" of slaveholders, and that as many as 300,000 former slaves continued to serve their former masters because of psychological or economic dependence.

LeBaron